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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000264

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SUBJECT: ASHURA PROCEEDS SMOOTHLY; CONTROVERSY ERUPTS IN AFTERMATH OF HOLIDAY

REF: MANAMA 0184

Classified by DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (SBU) An estimated 150,000 people participated in Ashura events in downtown Manama on February 8, the climax of the ten-day period during which Shia commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in Kerbala in 680 AD. By all accounts, activities went very quietly and smoothly with no reports of violence or confrontations. In a development unique to this year, marchers taking part in the processions walked over a collection of Danish flags painted and nailed into the street, in addition to American and Israeli flags. There was no Bahraini uniformed security presence in the area of the events, but volunteers wearing numbered badges and carrying radios provided assistance and information to those in need. Activists spoke out against the conviction of a group of 12 Shia youth for their involvement in a clash at the airport on December 25, and others gathered signatures for a petition demanding the drafting of a new constitution by an elected assembly. The biggest controversy occurred over a week after Ashura ended, when the media publicized the billboard of a Shia religious group containing a quote with apparently sectarian implications. Although the billboard was supposedly referring to events in the Ashura story, it was roundly condemned by opinion leaders for harming national unity. End Summary.

Ashura Passes Peacefully

2. (SBU) Some 150,000 people participated in Ashura processions in the old town of Manama on February 8, the final night of the ten-day Shia commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. By all accounts, including those of EmbOffs who attended the processions, the event went very smoothly with no reports of violence or confrontations. The event was marked by large groups of (mostly young) men, sometimes numbering in the thousands, marching in unison on a several-kilometer circuit while rhythmically beating their chests with their fists or striking their backs with strands of chain-link attached to wooden handles. The groups were organized by the many Shia religious/social halls in the area, called matams. The marchers were accompanied by readers describing the Ashura story as well as empty coffins and riderless horses symbolizing the death of Hussein. The most disturbing sight was a group of about 20 young men in military style headbands, t-shirts, and camouflage pants jogging slowly in unison chanting "Death to America, Death to Israel, Death to Denmark."

3. (SBU) In a twist unique to the 2006 event, marchers in the processions walked over 10-20 boards that were nailed into the street and painted as the Danish flag. This was in addition to a collection of boards painted in the colors of the American and Israeli flags. EmbOffs observed no participants carrying posters or flags of foreign leaders such as Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei or Hizballah SecGen Nasrallah, as the GOB claimed had occurred during Ashura festivities in 2005. EmbOffs saw a permanent billboard with a painting of prominent Bahraini Shia cleric Shaikh Issa Qassem positioned next to that Nasrallah, and a few matams placed televisions on the street broadcasting speeches and sermons, including those of Nasrallah. Flyers were taped to walls with photos of Ayatollah Sistani and quotes that were entirely religious (vice political) in nature.

Something for Everyone During Ashura

4. (SBU) In addition to the processions, organizers established many other diversions for attendees. Each matam manned booths offering free food and drink for anyone who asked, an art association exhibited the work of many local and foreign artists, all covering the themes of Ashura, and

the Naim and Muharraaq health centers organized blood drives. For the benefit of foreigners, a group offered lectures in English on the subject of Ashura and its meaning, and a troupe put on a play re-enacting the battle of Kerbala the evening of February 8. There were many displays similar to Christmas nativity scenes scattered throughout the area depicting aspects of the story, some bordering on gruesome in their attention to detail. As in previous years, a 25-piece marching band sporting black satin pants and sashes led a large group of mourners.

15. (SBU) In an interview with the press, Hussein Al Alawi, Processions Committee President Hussein Al Alawi said that the number of those participating in Ashura festivities was higher this year than in previous years because of the schools and universities being on spring holiday and the "thousands of Kuwaitis and Saudis" who came to take part in the activities. Al Alawi praised the participants for being well-behaved, noting that police and other security services were present to ensure the area was safe, secure and protected. Community police (unarmed officers from the local communities) were also present to help control the area. EmbOffs noticed no/no uniformed security presence in the area with the exception of traffic police controlling the flow of vehicles on the perimeter of the old town area. Volunteers associated with the matams, wearing large numbered badges and carrying radios, were deployed inside the processions zone and actively engaged with those present to provide information and assist those in need. A contact told EmbOff that Ashura was a period of tremendous freedom and liberation for Bahrain's Shia: "For ten days each year, we control the area. The government does it the other 355 days."

Convictions, Petition Charge Atmosphere

16. (SBU) Per reftel, 12 Shia youth were found guilty February 7 of taking part in an illegal gathering during a clash at Bahrain International Airport on December 25 and received sentences of two years in jail. (Another group of seven was convicted of the same offense one week later and was sentenced to one year in prison.) The harshness of the sentence angered many in the Shia community, and it was a steady topic of conversation in the downtown area during the final two days of Ashura. EmbOff observed a crowd of some 500 people listening to a speaker denouncing the government for the conviction. Despite the tension, there was no violence or clashes.

17. (SBU) The Haq ("Right") Movement, a hardline splinter group from leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq, issued a press release February 6 announcing a petition to be presented to the UN calling for a new "democratic" constitution drafted by a council of elected representatives. Petition supporters set up tables and booths in several sections of the downtown area and, outside the largest matam, showed a video about Shia poverty in Bahrain. Organizers announced their goal of getting 100,000 signatures, almost 25% of all Bahraini citizens, on the petition during Ashura. To date, there has been no announcement about the number of signatures, but knowledgeable sources say the group likely reached its goal.

Flags, Billboards Provoke Controversy

18. (SBU) Minister of Interior LTG Shaikh Rashid bin Hamad Al Khalifa met with Processions Committee President Al Alawi, Shura Council member Fouad Al Haji, and Council of Representatives (COR) deputy Issa Hassan bin Rajab February 4 to review security for the occasion. Shaikh Rashid stressed the religious importance of the events and pledged his cooperation and support. The meeting occurred at the same time that community leaders in Hamad Town (a mixed Sunni-Shia area) and Diraz, Shia village, were accusing police of pulling down the black flags that blanket Shia areas to mark Ashura. Northern Municipal Council members called these illegal acts and demanded an explanation from Northern Governor Ahmed bin Saloom and the Northern Security Directorate.

19. (SBU) The greatest controversy flared more than a week after Ashura ended. New Arabic daily Al Watan, which is reported to have ties to the country's Sunni Salafi community, published an article February 18 attacking a quote on a billboard sponsored by the Shia Islamic Enlightenment Society. The quote from Shaikh Issa Qassem says, in elliptical fashion, that Bahrain is divided into two camps, that of Hussein and that of Yazid (whose army killed Hussein and his followers in Kerbala). While a generous interpretation of the quote is that Qassem was referring to the differences between good, pious, observant Muslims and lapsed Muslims, most understand the reference to be to Shias (Hussein's camp) and Sunnis (Yazid's camp).

Opinion Leaders Condemn Sectarianism

10. (SBU) Senior officials, members of parliament, and columnists quickly dove into the controversy. At its regular Sunday morning meeting, the Cabinet February 19 condemned posters and slogans that threaten national unity, saying this is a misuse of democracy and freedom. The Cabinet urged companies and associations to adhere strictly to laws and regulations. PM Shaikh Khalifa highlighted the importance of using the atmosphere of openness and freedom of expression in a positive way to unite Bahrainis and criticized "offensive" banners. COR Speaker Khalifa Al Dhahrani, speaking at the Prime Minister's February 19 majles, condemned the slogan and said the billboard was a "balloon launched to test the limit" of acceptable speech. Minister of Social Development Fatima Al Balooshi threatened to take measures against the Islamic Enlightenment Society for posting a banner that "does not match the objectives of the society." Salafi Deputy Jassim Al Saeedi called for removing all banners that cause division in Bahraini society.

11. (SBU) Al Watan columnist Sawsan Al Shaer accused the Islamic Enlightenment Society and some Shia religious scholars of politicizing religion with the purpose of harming national unity. Several other writers echoed her comments. Editor-in-Chief of Al Wasat newspaper Mansour Al Jamry asserted that slogans that send mixed messages should not be posted so as to avoid instigating any conflict. He continued, "It is true that other religious societies also posted religious-political banners previously that scared the other side, but one mistake does not justify making another. We call for a stop to the accusations because we are all Bahrainis."

Comment

12. (C) Given the backdrop of intermittent clashes between Shia youth and police since late November 2005, Ashura was marked by a distinct lack of tension or violence. A Shia MP assured EmbOff that there would be no violence at the event, saying Shia want to show the government and all Bahrainis that they can police themselves when given the opportunity. Now that Ashura is over and Bahrain's security services control the streets once again, those seeking to provoke confrontations no longer feel the peer pressure to behave like they did during the holiday. While the scene has been mostly quiet since the end of Ashura, a charged atmosphere could return as supporters of the 19 jailed youth take to the streets and the timing of the municipal and legislative elections draws closer.

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